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The rough and the smooth: Performing masculinities in *Fingers* (1978) and *De battre mon coeur s'est arrêté* / *The Beat that My Heart Skipped* (2005)

Key words

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Harvey Keitel

It is well known that Jacques Audiard's *De battre mon coeur s'est arrêté* (*The Beat my heart skipped*) (2005) is a loose remake of James Toback's *Fingers* (1978). But, where *Fingers* was a critical and commercial failure that seemingly condemned Toback and star Harvey Keitel to a wilderness of minor projects for over a decade (Fine 1997: 118), *De battre* was sufficiently well received that it arguably marked a turning point in Audiard's career that saw him shift from being a respected French director to become a globally admired auteur, a position consolidated by the subsequent triumph of *Un prophète* (*A Prophet*) (2009). It is difficult to deny, then, that Audiard's is the more successful of the two films, and commentators, including Audiard himself, have implied that there are certainly very obvious flaws in *Fingers*, a film that the French director describes as having an 'invalid screenplay' (Rouyer and Vassé 2005: 22). Yet, for its admirers, including David Thomson (1994) and Adrian Martin (2004), *Fingers* is a masterpiece, a bold statement of New Hollywood cinema whose faults make it all the more fascinating as a portrait of fractured, conflicted masculinity. This article compares the two films in terms of their script, direction and performance in order to determine how Audiard's 'improvement' of Toback's model affects the portrait of a masculinity in crisis.

The principal problem with *Fingers* is the incoherence of its central character and, hence, of its narrative. The film's dramatic tension arises from Jimmy's (Harvey Keitel) split loyalty, to his father and organized crime, on the one hand, and to his mother and music on the other. While this basic opposition between a violent,

acquisitive paternal principle and a soft, creative maternal pole is perhaps in itself an adequate structuring device, the opposition – which, as has been widely recognized (Martin 2004: 318), is largely borrowed from *Mean Streets* (Martin Scorsese, 1973) – is so stark that it renders the character fundamentally implausible. Thomas Elsaesser has noted (2004: 280) that one of the characteristics of the New Hollywood is the refusal to provide clear narrative motivation for protagonists; yet the problem here is not so much the lack of motivation as the over-determined narrative tension that tends to render Jimmy more of a cipher than a credible character. At the beginning of *Fingers*, Jimmy is already a hugely accomplished pianist (indeed, ironically, the only complete and perfect rendering of the Bach toccata that he gives during the course of the film will be under the opening credits, while he is alone in his room). Yet it is difficult to imagine how he has arrived at this level of mastery given his dissolute and precarious lifestyle as a collector of illegal gambling debts and protection money for his gangster father. The natural talent is assumed to come from his mother, yet how has it been able to blossom without nurturing from her (shown to be psychologically disturbed and rejecting of her son) or from a formal education? Perhaps more to the point, although Keitel's distinctive combination of 'round-featuredness' and 'developed street-punk body' (Byron 1978: 36) may make him appropriate for this divided role, it is difficult to lend any credence to the idea that Jimmy's mother, a talented young Jewish concert pianist, would ever have been attracted to a low-end Italian-American hoodlum like Ben Angelelli (Michael V. Gazzo), who is clearly shown to be a failed and rather risible gangster. We should recognize, however, that these choices of narrative and characterization are clearly very deliberate on Toback's part. He stresses that more conventional relationships are 'fundamentally uninteresting' and that 'What I like to do is stretch things to their limit of credibility and then really get into those extreme cases which reveal the core' (Dempsey 1980-81: 30). This is consistent with Toback's repeated underlining of the elements of risk and adventure in filmmaking (for instance Toback 1995: 68), a conception of *film-as-gamble* that returns to his first screenplay for *The Gambler* (directed by Karel Reisz, 1974).

De battre mon coeur s'est arrêté seeks to address these flaws in Toback's film in a number of ways. At a fundamental level, we can say that the screenplay of *De battre* has a much greater structural complexity than that of *Fingers* and this allows for more subtle characterization. Although the division of films into scenes is not an

exact science, a rough breakdown of these two versions of the same story is revelatory. *Fingers* contains a total of twenty-three scenes for a ninety-minute duration, giving an average length of nearly four minutes per scene. This leads to some bravura sequences (the first restaurant scene between Jimmy and his father; the encounter with Dreems [Jim Brown]), but it means that each scene is required to contain and convey a lot of information about narrative and character, giving the whole film an intensity that it sometimes struggles to bear. As Martin puts it (2004: 315), ‘Toback is better at the broad strokes of a scene – concept, casting, location, musical accompaniment – than its shot-to-shot sculpting.’ In addition, there are a lot of loose ends in *Fingers*, key characters or plot elements are forcefully introduced and then never heard from again, such as Jimmy’s mother, his father’s girlfriend, and even his musicianship, so central to the plot yet seemingly forgotten by the end of the film (Martin 2004: 321). *De battre*, on the other hand, while it has a slightly longer running time (108 minutes), contains fully twice as many scenes as *Fingers* (forty-six) giving an average scene length of under two and a half minutes. This allows for a more incremental development of character with important nuances developing in scenes that may initially appear insignificant. Jean-Christophe Ferrari notes that Audiard seems less interested in the linear progress of the narrative than in a ‘halo of impressions and sensations’ projected around the protagonist (Ferrari 2005: 19). At the same time, these short, impressionistic scenes contribute to the pace of the film, especially in the early part of the narrative where scenes are often linked less by narrative logic than by violence, hand-held camerawork and loud music (for instance the scene transitions that move from a bar fight, to the discussion of a property deal, to the eviction of squatters from a building, to Tom [Romain Duris] listening to electro in his car [00:07:02 – 00:11:07]). More to the point, only six of *De battre*’s forty-six scenes directly reprise episodes from the earlier film. While these scenes contain the key turning points of the plot (the father’s money problems and entanglement with serious gangsters; the protagonist’s failed audition), they leave a lot of space to embroider characterizations around these basic points. As Rouyer and Vassé remark (2005: 21), the protagonist’s intimate trajectory is thus closely imbricated with the film’s more generic elements, an approach familiar from Audiard’s previous collaboration with screenwriter Tonino Benacquista on *Sur mes lèvres* (*Read My Lips*) (2001).

Audiard has explained that his collaborations with Benaquista begin as open-ended conversations around the characters that can last for several months before any writing takes place. In this way, the logic of character dominates the screenwriting process rather than any sentimental attachment to scenes or dialogue that might have been written earlier in the collaboration (Rouyer and Vassé 2005: 24). Despite this insistence on character, however, the narrative of *De battre* is actually very tightly controlled. Far from sharing the loose ends of *Fingers*, Audiard's film carefully sets up narrative developments by incidental details earlier in the film. Thus, the collision of Tom's two worlds is made manifest when he is awoken the night before his audition, by his colleagues wanting to seal a property deal. But the attentive spectator might have expected such a development since the date given for the audition ('the 23rd') is the day after an exchange of contracts mentioned in an earlier scene ('the 22nd'). Similarly, Tom's entering his father's apartment to find his dead body seems a natural development since, on two previous occasions, it has been shown that he has the keys to his father's place. The attention to detail here – in which significant narrative events must be prepared by earlier scenes and information is rarely introduced without being picked up later in the film – is in fact reminiscent of the model of screenwriting propounded by Hollywood gurus such as Robert McKee and Syd Field and perhaps helps to explain the warmth of Audiard's international reception. In short, as we will go on to demonstrate in detail, the jittery, impressionistic surface of Audiard's film arguably belies a rather more conventional and comforting narrative.

The father in Toback's film is a repulsive and ridiculous figure. He is first encountered, red-faced and breathless, eating slimy molluscs in a restaurant while wearing a garish yellow suit that, he explains, was 'sold to him for cream'. The gullibility implied by this ill-advised purchase is confirmed when Ben all too readily agrees to lend money to what is clearly a serially-indebted acquaintance. In turn, this naïve credulity renders worthless the support that Mr Angelelli willingly gives to his son's musical ambitions: 'You're gonna be big, kid, no question about it'. This susceptibility also extends to Ben's nineteen-year-old model girlfriend (Georgette Mosbacher), whom he presents to Jimmy as marriage material but who is evidently just having some fun with this 'sweet old man', as she puts it. Ben seems unable to see past Anita's 'tits like balloons', a sign of the objectifying view of women he has communicated to his son. The language of sexual objectification is repeatedly used in

the violent culture to which Jimmy's father belongs. When Jimmy goes to collect Luchino's (Lenny Montana) protection money, the restaurant owner tells him that Ben 'can suck my dick'. In an altercation in another restaurant, Jimmy threatens a man, 'I'll cut your fucking lips off, you cocksucker'. When Jimmy fails to help his father deal with Riccamonza (Anthony Sirico), the older man cries, 'What are you lookin' to do, stick your prick up my ass?' At stake in these violent encounters is an image of the self, either as active dominator or as passive victim, that is always and necessarily couched in sexual terms. Ben's concern about Riccamonza is not so much for his money as for his reputation as the Detroit gangster is bad-mouthing him all around town ('He's going around telling everyone he's stiffing me, and if I make any problems, he's gonna have me popped'). Jimmy's final revenge killing of Riccamonza is clearly staged as an emasculation since he disables the man by wrenching his testicles before shooting him through the eye sockets (making good on an earlier threat). In death, Riccamonza is rendered symbolically incapable of further objectifying the Angelellis with his contemptuous gaze.

One fundamental difference between *Fingers* and *De battre mon coeur s'est arrêté* is the change in the father and son's business, from career criminals to property dealers. While, as Julia Dobson points out (2008: 53), this allows Audiard to demonstrate some uncomfortable parallels between the property industry and organized crime (we repeatedly see Tom and his colleagues terrorizing homeless immigrants who are squatting in their buildings), it also places Tom and his father at a relatively safe distance from 'real' criminals, thus rendering them more immediately likeable. Tom collects not protection money, but overdue rent, and only does so after witnessing his father roughly ejected from the restaurant in question, making his own violent reaction, if not justified, at least understandable. The Russian gangster Minskov (Anton Yakovlev, the Riccamonza equivalent) is, as Tom tells his father in no uncertain terms, 'not someone like us'. Tom's threat to him over the telephone lacks the colourful language of *Fingers* and, indeed, delivered in American English (since Minskov doesn't speak French), comes across like a quotation from a movie ('If you don't give back the money to my father, I'll kill you, motherfucker!'). Tom even winks and grins at a passerby as he says it, as though he knows it's only a game. In addition, Minskov is introduced much later in the plot of *De battre*. Ben Angelelli asks for Jimmy's help with both Luchino and Riccamonza in the same scene, around ten minutes into *Fingers*, clearly showing the two problems to be different aspects of

the same job (a protection racket and an illegal gambling ring). Minskov is not mentioned until a full hour into Audiard's film and only after Mr. Seyr (Niels Arestrup) has already been badly beaten by him. The development thus clearly marks an escalation in the gravity of the plot. Another important difference in the depiction of Tom's father is his girlfriend, the equivalent of Anita O'Hallohan. Unlike Anita, defined by her status as a glamour model, Chris is a real character, who recurs later in the film and stands up to Tom, and she is played by an established actress (Emmanuelle Devos), rather than an unknown model,¹ able to lend a vulnerability and a wounded pride to the woman in her two short scenes.

The stark differences between the films are also seen in the protagonist's relationship to his mother and, through her, to music. Jimmy's mother (Marian Seldes) is in a psychiatric hospital and gives her son conflicting signals, both encouraging a quasi-sexual rapport ('You call that a kiss?' she asks, when he gives her a peck on the cheek) and pushing him away when he admits his failure at the piano audition. A neat cut leads directly from the audition room in the music hall to the hospital corridor, implying that Jimmy associates his mother with music, but also with failure. Jimmy clearly loves music, but he also instrumentalizes it, using it as a way to connect with other people. In places, this can be read as a positive gesture, as when he seeks to woo Carol (Tisa Farrow) in the street by playing 'Summertime, Summertime' (The Jamies, 1958) on his tape deck. But, most often (and, indeed, arguably too in the scene with Carol), Jimmy's public broadcasting of his music is an attempt to impose his will on others and a sign of his disrespect for boundaries. The same song used to woo Carol later causes a fight to break out when Jimmy plays it in a crowded restaurant. Similarly, he uses his radio, playing 'Angel of the Morning' (Merrilee Rush, 1968), to show his disrespect for Luchino in the pizza restaurant. The jarring inappropriateness of the music for the situation (a contrapuntal trick clearly learned from Martin Scorsese, and notably *Mean Streets*) further demonstrates the irreconcilability between Jimmy's two lives (as musician and as gangster).

This confusion is also seen in Jimmy's heterosexual relations. Given a violent father and a mother with high expectations, Jimmy is aggressive in his pursuit of women, insistently courting Carol despite her offhand manner and at one point demanding that she remove her diaphragm before sex. He effectively rapes Riccamonza's girlfriend (Tanya Roberts) as a gesture of brinksmanship between two gangsters. Yet, at the same time, Jimmy is repeatedly shown to be impotent in sexual

encounters, seemingly paralyzed by the combined effect of his mother's disgust and his father's disappointment. Following the visit to his mother, and after a brief, intervening scene of Jimmy pacing around at home like a caged animal, he visits Carol, practically forcing his way into her apartment, but is initially unable to perform. 'I need you to want me,' he tells her, 'If you don't want me, I can't do anything.' As Martin puts it (2004: 320), 'his desire for Carol only seems to come in a rush in moments of desperation that originate elsewhere.' Jimmy's sexual crisis is symbolized in the film by his prostate trouble, which causes him pain and difficulty urinating. The swollen prostate has apparently been triggered by Jimmy's attempts to perform what he calls 'heroic fucks': delaying his orgasm for the sake of his partner's pleasure. But, given all we already know of Jimmy's anxiety, this comes across less as an unselfish attempt to put his partner first than as a pathological obsession with how others see him. In Martin's memorable phrase (2004: 310) this is 'a strained and tense will-to-masculinity. Not a hero, but the difficult, pained effort to conjure one.' This is further emblemized in the figure of Dreems, a monolithic incarnation of black masculinity played by the former American football player Jim Brown, whom Toback himself has described as 'a crystallization of physical potency' (in Harris 2006: 65). Prior to his film career, Toback had closely shadowed Brown in order to write a participatory biography of him (Martin 2004: 313). In *Fingers*, Dreems is a former boxer and current pimp to whom Carol seems to run whenever she is not with Jimmy. In perhaps the film's most intense and hypnotic – 'quasi-hallucinatory' (Martin 2004: 328) – scene, Dreems keeps his gaze largely fixed on Jimmy while engaging in foreplay with Carol and another young woman, Christa (Carole Francis), mocking Jimmy's inability to 'get his thing together'. Subsequently, Jimmy is seen at home alone crying and drinking milk and the image appears to connote both regression to childhood and displaced homoeroticism, the milk standing at once for Dreems's semen and for the fantasised milk that Carol and Christa suckle one from each of Dreems's nipples. When Jimmy's father arrives and tells him *both* 'What are you lookin' to do, stick your prick up my ass?' *and* 'I shoulda strangled you in your crib', this dual crisis of Jimmy's sexual identity is amply confirmed.

By contrast, in *De battre*, Tom's mother is dead, under circumstances that are never explained, but she presumably died relatively young, given the age of Tom's father (actor Niels Arestrup was only in his mid-fifties when *De battre* was filmed). Evidence of the mother's anxiety and perfectionism is presented when Tom listens to

tapes of her recording sessions so it seems plausible that this nervous condition could have led either to suicide or to fatal illness. Tom, too, is highly strung: he speaks very fast, his hands and legs are restless, and his gaze rarely settles in one place for long. Yet Tom finds evident solace in music and, in contrast to Jimmy Angelelli, music for Tom is most often associated with solitude. He often listens on headphones, shutting himself off from the world of his father and the property business. His production and consumption of piano music comes across as a privileged moment of communion with his late mother, taking place in the solitude of Tom's dim but warmly lit apartment where he caresses his mother's annotated musical scores as he listens to her recordings. Music is presented as a sensual experience for Tom: at home, he often plays the piano topless, and notably after making love to Aline (Aure Atika). The one example in the film where incongruously bright pop music soundtracks a scene of violence, as in *Fingers*, is when a version of 'The Locomotion' (Camille Bazbaz and Mayane Deleme, 2004) plays on the radio while Tom and his colleagues forcibly evict some squatters from one of their buildings. Since this happens the night before Tom's audition, it signals the distance between his professional life and the world of classical piano to which he apparently aspires. But the scene, arriving late in the film, is almost too knowing an acknowledgement of Toback's source material; when, during the scene, Fabrice (Jonathan Zaccari) raises his eyebrows and shakes his head at Tom, the gesture almost stands as an admission by Audiard that this sound/image counterpoint is too facile and derivative to be taken seriously as a formal construction in twenty-first-century cinema.

Tom shows little of the sexual anxiety displayed by Jimmy. While there is no direct counterpart to Dreems in Audiard's film, his closest structural equivalent in the narrative of *De battre* is Tom's colleague Fabrice, a serial womanizer. But Fabrice is pointedly depicted as a repellent misogynist who feels entitled to sex with as many women as he likes. When Tom embarks on a tender affair with his wife Aline, it is both a consolation for her and a kind of natural justice against Fabrice. Meanwhile, where Jimmy rapes Riccamonza's girl, turning her into the victim of a dispute between two violent men, Tom charms Minskov's companion (Mélanie Laurent), his initial dismissive jibes morphing into an open-ended interrogation of her motivation that enables her to reveal her vulnerability on her own terms. But Audiard and Benaquista's greatest addition to Toback's original screenplay is the character of Miao Lin (Linh Dan Pham), a figure with no equivalent in *Fingers*. Miao Lin's tuition

adds to the equation of music with femininity and also helps to make Tom a more likeable character. The development of their relationship follows the familiar pattern of odd couples in romantic comedy, since, initially, they seem destined to detest each other (Miao Lin does not speak French or allow smoking in her apartment; Tom is an impatient and demanding pupil), yet they gradually learn to communicate through the language of music and gesture. The film even contains comic scenes such as the one where Tom seeks to teach Miao Lin French vocabulary, the spatial distribution of the characters in Miao Lin's tiny kitchen subsequently reiterated in a scene of companionable silence. As Jean-Christophe Ferrari points out (2005: 19), the tight framing of these scenes 'underlines the structure and solidity' that these lessons give to Tom's otherwise chaotic life. A sexual tension is implied when, at the end of their teacher-pupil relationship, Miao Lin offers her hand to shake and Tom kisses her instead. The epilogue leaves it ambiguous whether Tom has only become Miao Lin's manager or whether the pair are also lovers, as might be implied by his massaging of her neck.

In general, we could say that, while Jimmy, and *Fingers* more generally, are obsessed with seeing and being seen, *De battre* is a film about listening and being heard. Although Jimmy first meets Carol when she hears him practising the piano in his apartment, their encounter is visually encoded from the outset since she stares at him from across the street and Jimmy returns her gaze in a reverse shot. Jimmy, it turns out, can only play to a high standard when he is alone; when he is watched, as at the audition, 'I can't seem to relax, my hands don't work right, my mind starts interfering'. When Jimmy's mother hears this, she turns to face the wall, as though unable to bear the sight of him in her disappointment. As we have already seen, Ben's concern for his public image leads him to be murdered by Riccamonza whereas Jimmy's preoccupation with how he appears as a lover has led to his enlarged prostate and renders him impotent under Dreems's gaze. By contrast, Tom is shown to be a good listener: in the opening sequence he listens compassionately to his friend Sami (Gilles Cohen) and he further demonstrates his capacity for empathy by listening to Minskov's girlfriend. Tom's father, we might say, is killed not so much because he fears for his reputation but because he fails to listen to his son who advises him unambiguously to write off the debt Minskov owes him. Meanwhile, with Miao Lin, Tom explains that he does not want lessons so much as someone to listen to him and give him their opinion. He explicitly does *not* want Miao Lin to *watch* him play,

physically positioning her so that she looks out of the window rather than at him. But he repeatedly shows that he is able to listen to Miao Lin and understand her advice, even when she speaks to him in Vietnamese. Tom's relationship to his mother, as we have seen, is conducted through sound and one short scene neatly demonstrates how the erotics of listening also infiltrate his relationship with Aline. Tom engages her in a kind of phone sex by asking what she is wearing, signaling his acute attention with the line, 'There's no need to shout, you can say it quietly.' Kaja Silverman has argued that, in the cinema, female voices are often associated with a pre-linguistic mode that is tied to a fantasy of the maternal voice as 'sonorous envelope' and charged with 'either intensely positive or intensely negative affect' (1988: 72). In *De battre*, the female voice certainly has a positive erotic charge, and its association with the pre-linguistic can be seen through the mother's music and through Miao Lin's use of an unsubtitled foreign language, but also through the fact that we, as spectators, are not given to hear (but only to imagine) Aline's side of the phone-sex conversation. Similarly, during Tom's seduction of Minskov's girlfriend, we hear her whispered confidences through a bathroom door, not quite able to make out the sense, but capturing the changes in timbre that imply her gradual acquiescence to Tom's importunate advances. Jean-Luc Nancy suggests that the act of listening, insofar as it pays attention to the musicality of sound, is always at the edge of sense, 'as though sound were precisely nothing but this edge, this fringe or this margin' of sense (2002: 21). Nancy goes on to say that to be listening is to enter into a relationship to the self or into the self *as relationship*: listening reveals the self not as something substantial or subsisting, but as something closer to an echo, 'the resonance of a reverberation' (30). With this in mind, the importance of sound and listening in *De battre mon coeur s'est arrêté* can perhaps help us to understand the relative volatility and malleability of Tom's character as compared to the rather fixed idea of Jimmy in *Fingers*.

Sound plays an important organizing role in *De battre* from the very start. The early scenes of Audiard's film are dimly lit with a restless camera and a lot of movement within the frame such that the spectator relies more than normal on dialogue to orient herself within the incipient narrative. *Fingers*, by contrast, relies heavily on the gaze in establishing its narrative and characterization. As mentioned above, the relationship between Jimmy and Carol is initiated by an exchange of gazes. Carol is discovered gazing from across the street by a slow movement of the camera that reveals her presence in the corner of the frame, a shot that is not without recalling

the conventions of horror cinema (one of the genres most comprehensively revived by the new Hollywood of the 1970s). The reverse shot to show Jimmy looking back adds to the spectator's disquiet, since the sudden cut to Carol's point of view is only half motivated (she has yet to be introduced as a character) and half exact (the medium close-up of Jimmy does not conform to her real distance on the other side of the street and several floors below). The first restaurant scene with Jimmy's dad opens with a lengthy medium close-up of Jimmy drumming his fingers and humming along to 'One Fine Day' (The Chiffons, 1963) until a surprise reverse-shot shows Ben across the table. Jimmy's absorption by the music is such that the spectator initially assumes him to be alone; the awkward edit is therefore telling about Jimmy's incomplete investment in his father's world and about his use of music as both barricade and battering ram in the service of his interpersonal relations. Later in the same scene, there is a repeated exchange of gazes between Jimmy and three young men beside the bar that causes Ben to ask his son why he is so distracted. Although there is no dramatic outcome from the exchange of looks and the men are never seen again, their seductive appearance, and the insistence of their gaze, implies that they might be gay thus raising initial questions about Jimmy's sexuality, or at least about his own insecurities regarding his sexual image. As Martin puts it (2004: 312), '[T]he obsessed hero is consumed by the vocation of "show-making" [...] He transforms his life into a kind of theatre.' Martin adds: 'He desperately seeks mirror-figures to shore up his failing self-image, and never finds one' (322). Harvey Keitel confirms that this was also his understanding of the scene: 'This is a very desperate character. This fellow would flirt with anything (*sic*) to get some love' (in Bryon 1978: 40).

The different focus of these opening sequences is representative of broader formal tendencies in the two films. *Fingers* appears to be a clear and well organized film: its scenes are well lit and crisply photographed with key elements of plot and major characters all promptly introduced. Yet there is a roughness and haste to many scenes and it is not always easy to determine whether this is a deliberate indication of Jimmy's neurosis or a sign of Toback's inexperience (this was, after all, his directorial debut, although editor Robert Lawrence was an experienced technician of late classical Hollywood). The awkward edits listed above are joined by others for which it is harder to give a charitable reading. Thus, Jimmy and Carol go from being on the street to in his car even though no significant pause is implied in their conversation, while Jimmy's subsequent crashing of the car is weakly signaled by a sound off and a

cutaway, no doubt in order to avoid the expense of actually denting an automobile. The use of the car, which never appears again, seems largely unmotivated, except as an excuse to demonstrate Jimmy's over-compensation in the sexual arena: 'This car is a part of my body,' he is saying just before he crashes it, 'It's an extension of my —.' This example is representative of a recurrent tendency in *Fingers* to overload the film with symbolism or scenes that are too obviously connotative. Audiard and Benaquista wisely cut a scene in which Jimmy gets temporarily stuck in an elevator on his way to the piano audition, an unnecessary literalization of his already apparent proximity to panic. Similarly over-determined are the skewed camera angles which appear in the scenes of Ben's death and the murder of Riccamonza (but nowhere else) and the whole scene with Dreems. If the scene is saved the magnetism of Jim Brown's calm, slow performance, the dialogue too insistently underlines Jimmy's sexual inadequacy and the homosocial implications that are sufficiently obvious from the *mise-en-scène*.

Contrariwise, *De battre* gives the superficial appearance of roughness while being, on closer inspection, a formidably constructed and very self-assured enterprise. The unstable camerawork noted in the early scenes continues for much of the film, in particular hounding Tom/Duris with angled extreme close-ups and jittery handheld reframings. The film also displays a recurrent taste for bright artificial lights, sometimes in almost abstract patterns (Dobson 2007: 44). In an early scene, Tom is distracted from a property deal by a red spot on the floor, presumably emanating from some unidentified laser. When he drives his car at night, the reflection of streetlights spinning in the windows creates elongated patterns of light on the screen. Meanwhile, the geometric shapes and soft blue light of the computer standby screens in Tom's apartment help to generate the womblike atmosphere of his nocturnal communions with the piano. This interest in semi-abstract patterns of light leads Ferrari to suggest (2005: 19) that Audiard's film is not about a character so much as 'the becoming of a quantum of energy.' But if this visual style, together with the proliferation of brief scenes, can initially make the film seem narratively ambiguous or hard to follow, it actually turns out to be much more tightly plotted and morally straightforward than *Fingers*. To begin with, Audiard stresses that, despite the proliferation of short scenes, he filmed wherever possible in long takes in order to give rhythm and continuity to these scenes (Rouyer and Vassé 2005: 21-22). In *De battre*, Tom's career in property and his musical ambitions, while still opposed, are much more densely interwoven: he is repeatedly shown in trouble with colleagues for

his lack of attention to his work and obliged to go out late to close a deal on the night before his audition, which may or may not explain his lapse of concentration at the piano. Key characters like Chris and Miao Lin are followed through in the narrative of *De battre* whereas seemingly important characters in *Fingers* like Anita, Inspector Levy (Zack Norman) and Christa are introduced, only to be dropped. As already mentioned, Tom's distance from organized crime, his gentleness with women and his concern for his father make him a morally sympathetic character, a status confirmed by his final choice not to kill Minskov. Symbolism in *De battre* is more neatly integrated into the narrative. The clearest example is the wound that Tom sustains to his hand during the fight in the couscous restaurant, a sign of the dubious lifestyle he seeks to leave behind but that remains visible on his hand as he practises with Miao Lin. The device is eloquent, but unobtrusive, and is sustained when the film ends with a close-up of Tom's bloodied hands in the concert hall as he watches Miao Lin perform following his fight with Minskov, a suggestion of incomplete closure on his violent past. Finally, the relative narrative complexity of *De battre* (in terms of its greater number of scenes and interlocking plot lines) is smoothed over by the film's use of music. On a number of occasions, sound bridges link Tom's home practices with sessions at Miao Lin's, or diegetic piano music is mixed, either into non-diegetic orchestral music or into diegetic or semi-diegetic electro music to aid the transition between scenes. In this way, music aids narrative progression in the film but is deliberately misleading since it implies an irresistible momentum to Tom's progress which is in fact belied by his failure at the audition. In contrast to Jimmy, Tom is far from an accomplished pianist at the beginning of the film, his progress is slow and faltering, and, at the audition, his mistakes are more blatant and he goes to pieces more quickly. Ferrari admires the space that Audiard's film allows for failure; as he points out, 'Sometimes, indeed, failure provides a richer education than success, and is more pregnant with possibility' (2005: 20). What this means is that Tom has a more complete character arc than Jimmy: in true Oedipal fashion, he stakes out his independence from his father, yet comes to have a realistic rather than idealized vision of himself and the film ends by leaving in doubt the character's capacity fully to renounce his past. *De battre mon coeur s'est arrêté* becomes the story of an unorthodox (re-)education, just like most of Audiard's other films (Rouyer and Vassé 2005: 22). Jimmy Angelelli, on the other hand, is a fully-formed pianist at the beginning of *Fingers* yet neurotically divided by his inability to reconcile his father

and mother's influences and the narrative goes no way toward resolving this conflict. Jimmy's murder of Riccamonza, finally, leaves him with nowhere to turn, the film's final shot tracking him like a hunted animal.

The important differences between the two films are also manifest in the central performances of Harvey Keitel and Romain Duris. On the release of *Fingers*, *Time* magazine offered the withering assessment: 'Keitel gives the first terrible performance of his career' (in Fine 1997: 118). Or, as Fine puts it somewhat more charitably: 'He obviously has great emotional range but seems almost unable to control the effect he achieves' (114). Commentators have debated whether this is the fault of the actor or the director. Fine's view is that, 'Given the quality of the rest of the film, the latter seems most likely' (114). Audiard notes that *Fingers*, in common with many films of the New Hollywood, favours long takes and pregnant pauses, such that 'We sense the distress of the actor faced with a director who leaves the camera running' (in Rouyer and Vassé 2005: 22). But, given the tight focalization of the film around Jimmy, *Fingers* is really Keitel's picture to win or lose and he must bear a large part of the responsibility for the film's infelicities. Keitel, at this point in his career, was employing Method acting techniques, engaged in intensely concentrated preparation between takes on set (Byron 1978: 36). He studied Glenn Gould's piano technique for his role as Jimmy (Dempsey 1980-81: 26) and worked out every detail of the character's backstory (Byron 1978: 37). In interview with Stuart Byron, Keitel is clear that he conceived of Jimmy's many tics and awkward mannerisms as a way of expressing his neurosis: 'The motivation always comes before the gesture' (37). Unfortunately, this is only too clear in the film, such that Jimmy's movements too often appear as an artificial illustration of a patent psychic disturbance rather than serving as subtle indicators of a trouble lying beneath the surface. During the ten minutes of the first restaurant scene between Jimmy and his father, we watch Jimmy/Keitel: sing under his breath; drums his fingers on the table, on his radio, on an imaginary piano, and on his lips; repeatedly touch his mouth, his nose, his cheek, his forehead and his ears; shift in his seat; fiddle with the buttons on the radio (to no effect); shoot his cuffs; splay his fingers; look distractedly around the room; smooth his hair; stretch his fingers against his opposite hand; stammer and refuse to meet his father's gaze; rock back and forth on his chair. Watching this pantomime of neurosis, one cannot help but be reminded of David Thomson's advice: 'it is often preferable to have a movie actor who moves well than one who "understands" the part' (in Klevan

2005: 2). Of course, Thomson's preference for performers who are relaxed in front of the camera would hardly be appropriate for the actor playing Jimmy Angelelli, yet, as Klevan stresses, 'Good performances do not need a striking piece of physical behaviour to make a mark' (82). The art of film performance often depends upon 'the performer's capacities for revealing *and* withholding aspects of the character's sensibility' (9). Keitel's performance in *Fingers* leaves nothing for the spectator to interpret.

Romain Duris's performance as Thomas Seyr is very different. Audiard has stated that he sees *De battre* as a film about a young man's transition to adulthood, leaving behind the last vestiges of his adolescent behaviour. As such, he felt that Duris's on-screen persona fit the role well since the actor was discovered by Cédric Klapisch when he was barely twenty years old and many of his subsequent film roles stressed his youth and gradual accession to manhood (Rouyer and Vassé 2005: 25). Audiard's work with actors also encourages them to flesh out a backstory for the character since, in rehearsals, he prefers to improvise situations around the characters and the narrative so as not to exhaust the dialogue in the script (21). Duris, like Keitel, was clearly deeply invested in the role and has remarked how difficult he found it to 'leave him on the set' at the end of shooting (Baumann and Martinez 2007: 100). But Duris's performance is much more balanced and naturalistic than Keitel's, as is clear from a comparison of the equivalent restaurant scene in *De battre*. Like Jimmy, Tom moves in time to music, but only so long as he is wearing his headphones, which he removes after his father arrives. The gestures of Duris's performance are generally a lot smaller than Keitel's, many of them confined to the movement of the actor's eyebrows or to his ironic smiles. Like Jimmy, Tom's gaze flits from left to right, but this is less expressive of his distraction than a certain embarrassment or self-consciousness at being seen in public with his father. When he does look at the older man, Tom/Duris's eyeballs won't stay still, as though he is rapidly and coldly evaluating him. When Mr Seyr asks for Tom's help collecting the over-due rent, his son's body language is eloquent as he begins putting his iPod away, busying himself with another matter, making preparations to leave. What is striking, too, is that Tom/Duris's gaze becomes much more fixed when talking to Chris in his father's absence. This suggests that Tom's discomfort arises largely as a result of being in his father's company and that, in the presence of women, he is able to adopt a confrontational charm that masks his nervousness. When Tom gets up to leave,

however, we see that he has left behind a disintegrated bread roll, a sign of the young man's nervous tension that had been concealed from us for the duration of the scene. Duris's agitated performance as Tom also gains from the contrast with the much more calm and controlled acting of his co-stars, in particular Niels Arestrup's chilly stillness in the role of Tom's father. In the second lunch meeting, which Mr Seyr conveniently arranges across the road from the couscous restaurant with the over-due rent, Robert/Arestrup sits with his arm across the back of a chair, smoking and staring out of the window while Tom looks in the opposite direction, into the room. The men's anger at each other – a residual resentment over the last years of Tom's mother – is expressed through their refusal to engage in emotional disclosure with each other. Elsewhere, Duris's performance is brought out through the contrast to Linh Dan Pham's meticulous turn as Miao Lin. A combination of the character's discipline and precision and the implied cultural repression of this young East Asian on unfamiliar ground in France mean that Miao Lin's emotional response is often confined to miniscule blinks even as Tom seems to take over her private space with his angry outbursts and over-familiarity.

Duris succeeds in conveying a sense of spontaneity in much of Tom's behaviour. In particular, two key plot developments in the film – the arrangement of an audition with Fox and Tom's declaration of love for Aline – come across as unprepared actions that Tom decides on the spot. In the first scene, Tom is driving through the city at night, seemingly alert to distractions, looking to the side and in the rearview mirror, when the sight of Mr. Fox (Sandy Whitelaw) causes him to stop suddenly. It is Duris's ability to show the rapid passage of several emotions on his face that grants this scene its appearance of spontaneity. We see a quick, dark distance in Tom's eyes when he evokes his mother's death and, when Fox invites him to come to audition, Tom initially balks, but the gesture is so rapid that Fox seems not to see it and the impresario's guileless faith in Tom allows the prospect of the audition to take hold as a credible reality. In the scene with Aline, a chance meeting in a café at night serves to expose the fact that Fabrice has been using Tom as an alibi when he goes out with other women. When Aline asks why Tom allows this, his crestfallen gaze at the ground would seem to imply that he has just realized his own inability to answer the question. A moment later, he runs down the street after Aline and explains that he is in love with her, citing their awkwardness in each other's company as evidence. One could interpret this in several ways: 1) Tom really has been in love with Aline for

some time but not dared to say anything until now; 2) Tom really is in love with Aline but has only just realized it; 3) This is simply a ploy by Tom to redress the balance on a situation that has left him socially embarrassed and morally ashamed; or 4) He undertakes this improbable declaration as a kind of pure, spontaneous challenge to himself, comparable to his later seduction of Minskova's girlfriend, or indeed to the acceptance of the audition with Mr. Fox. This final interpretation, with its taste for reckless gambles, sees *De battre mon coeur s'est arrêté* remain faithful to the spirit of Toback's film, if not to the letter.) The brilliance of Duris's performance here is to keep all of these possibilities in play at once. The apparent spontaneity of the act recalls a quality that David Thomson admires in one of the greatest of all screen actors, Cary Grant:

a diffidence or reserve to the events of his movies which gives the immediate impression of a real intelligence meeting those events not in a predetermined way but with a flexible novelty of experience. As the attitude attracts our interest, so the completeness of our involvement in the wide potential of his decisions reflects on our interest and thus on what, in the same circumstances, our decision might be. It is Grant's ability to suggest the embodiment of all characteristics simultaneously (in Klevan 2005: 11-12).

Where Harvey Keitel's Jimmy seems frozen between his two mutually exclusive poles (pianist or gangster), Romain Duris's Tom is alive to possibility. It is this flexibility to the performance that also successfully motivates the final shift in the film's narrative in which Tom becomes Miao Lin's manager, an entirely believable development.

From whatever position one chooses to regard it – that of professional achievement, or formal construction, or spectatorial pleasure –, *De battre* is a better film than *Fingers*: better written, better directed, better edited, better performed. But to recognize this is perhaps to ignore the fact that the interest of *Fingers* lies precisely in its failure: it is a failed film about failure. Astonishing though Keitel's performance is, in places its exaggeration seems more suited to comedy than to serious drama. This is the case in the restaurant scene described above, where the caricatured father and Anita's apparent willingness to play up to the role of bimbo add to a certain lightness of tone. Elsewhere, however, Keitel's restlessness sits awkwardly alongside the muted

performance of Tisa Farrow, which remains ironically much more successful at suggesting psychological damage. But the taste for failure was unmistakably in vogue in 1970s Hollywood and spoke to what Thomas Elsaesser calls ‘a radical scepticism about American virtues of ambition, vision, drive: themselves the unacknowledged, because firmly underpinning architecture of the classical Hollywood action genres’ (2005: 282). Indeed, in *Fingers*, both the route of aggressive acquisition of capital (represented by the father) and that of artistic accomplishment (represented by the mother) appear equally unattractive: the former leads to interpersonal obtuseness, ill health and violent death, the latter to solitude and psychosis. In illustrating this theme, however, Toback’s film is perhaps hamstrung by its over-investment in visual concepts: Keitel’s tics and twitches; the figure of Dreems, who sometimes seems more like a statue than a character and the conspicuous targeting of Riccamonza’s testicles and eyes. For a film about music, *De battre* does a much subtler job of creating a sound-world, with Tom’s hurried but carefully modulated speech, the mysterious voice of the absent mother, or Miao Lin’s hypnotic combination of onomatopoeia, Italian musical vocabulary and Vietnamese commentary. Audiard’s film also gives a more realistic sense of the way that music inhabits most of our lives, not as a confrontational public performance, but as something that surrounds and accompanies us, fading in and out of our consciousness. It might be worth asking, on the basis of a much broader sample, how far the opposition between looking and listening can be mapped on to the wider rift between American and French (or European) cinema: does the play of looks famously laid bare by feminist film theory work to preclude greater investment in listening in Hollywood and is this tendency rectified in European cultural contexts with a publicly valued tradition of oral expression and conversation? Finally, however, in ‘correcting’ the various faults of *Fingers* – rendering its narrative more credible and its protagonist more likeable – does *De battre* risk eliminating some of the most interesting and productive tensions of Toback’s film? For all his status as global art cinema auteur, Audiard’s clean-up job on *Fingers* perhaps reveals him, finally, as just a commercial genre filmmaker, however talented.

Filmography

De battre mon coeur s’est arrêté, 2005, Jacques Audiard, France.

Fingers, 1978, James Toback, USA.

Gambler, The, 1974, Karel Reisz, USA.
Mean Streets, 1973, Martin Scorsese, USA.
Sur mes lèvres, 2001, Jacques Audiard, France.
Un prophète, 2009, Jacques Audiard, France.

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¹ An unknown model at the time, Georgette Mosbacher (who was actually thirty when she played Anita, rather than the character's supposed age of nineteen) has gone on to become CEO of a cosmetics company, a women's motivational coach and a Republican Party fundraiser, as though to disprove Jimmy Angelelli's dismissive characterization of her as 'a lowlife'.